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Lament for Brittany and Days of Darkness

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English translation of the volume of poems Reun ar C'halan, *Klemmgan Breizh* (Brest: Al Liamm, 1985. Pp. 80

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René Galand

Lament for Brittany

Foreword

Which voice is heard here ? On thing is certain: it is not the author's. Rimbaud was right: « *JE est un autre.* » At any rate, it is not a single voice which speaks in these texts, but many, well known to Breton readers. They gave heard their echo in such works as *Barzaz Breiz*, *Emgann Kergidu*, *Ar an deulin*, *Sketla Segobrani*, *An Aotrou Bimbochet e Breizh*, *Nomenoe Oe!*, and many others. Other indications will be found in the notes.

I

The gods then were so close to us
They placed in our hands the golden herb of dream
The earth sang to us through the mouths of fountains
Roses bloomed under each of our steps
The grass was as soft as a woman's hair
And the trees offered their fruit
The sun waddled in the water
And our eyes laughed at its flame
Far away, the sea kept shining like a mirage
Each star whispered its name in our ears
The bee of wisdom hummed around our brows
And we sang hymns to the night
The night so soft with its velvet sighs

II

Long will we mourn the free days of childhood
The fruit were not rotten in the trees of Eden
Swamp water and moldy bread would soon be our lot
But we followed the foxes' teaching
And there was no lie in our frolics
The moon came down to touch the oaks
And the rain dripped on the black earth
A dream brought ten girls to the heath
Their eyes as bright as the fountains
A hand traced the shadow of pleasure
In the night as warm as a woman's breast
The grass was moist in the Southern breeze
Was it truly the time of love?

IV

The light still slept over the orchard
Summer was all dressed up in amber and emerald
The winds were playing four corners
And an angel was skipping rope
The day was fragrant from his smile

No, this was not a dream
We walked over hills of blue slate
As large birds flew ahead of us
Life opened wide under the sun
What did we know of Death's secrets?
Far away, the sea shook her silver rings
The wine in the bowls sang its golden song
And pleasure planted its scenery

VI

Sleepers lost at the crossroads of dream
We chased after insolent beauty
In pursuit of the wolf's daughters
Women who looked like the night
They were as striking as Northern lights
And their passion was stronger than death
Musicians came with their pipes
Playing tunes as beautiful as fire
We would gather the giant rose of the winds
But what we loved most was the love
Of the bare-breasted mermaid reborn of the sea
Dawn blew away the dream
The bell tower rang our farewells

VII

In vain we waited at the doors of night
But each day undid the web of our dreams
A mangy dog had found our shelter
And lovers were afraid of the stars
Taverns served only wormwood wine
The fountains kept their secrets well hidden
The bridge was crumbling above the strait
We had dallied too long in the fay's orchard
The time had come to leave the fair isle
Soon we would reach the ruthless years
Would we ever see Avalon again?
Orpheus had played his final song
The knave of spades had stopped the dice

IX

And yet the Celts had reigned over Europe
Their blue swords sang in battles
Another empire had finally won
Tribe after tribe yielded to Rome
Women and children sold to the highest bidder
The warriors' hands cut off at the wrist

Rebellions were drowned in blood
Rome fell to the Barbarians
King Arthur's army marched in the mountains
The knights rode by, their lances shining in the sun
Blood flowed in the valleys
From across the sea the eagle called to our fathers
Armorica would be their refuge

XV

To Sant-Albin-an Hiliber thousands had come
Pikesmen, bowmen, foot soldiers and cavalry
Who still knows their names?
Breton words must have sounded rough in their mouth
When they cursed the French and their spies
They had fought all day
At sunset they were beaten
They had done everything they could
What more could they give but their life?
A simple stone marks the battlefield
Bloom on the gorse, bloom on the heather
Fallen heroes in our prayer

XVIII

It was the time of the great fear
The millstones of fate kept grinding
An entire people was dying on the wounded earth
Dying with their mouth open and full of blood
They were pursued like wild wolves
Forced to bend their head under the yoke
Blood and sweat dripped on their faces
Some were hanged, others sent to the galleys
The flesh burnt under the red-hot iron
Pontkalleg beheaded on the scaffold
Kadoudal on the guillotine
And so many shot by firing squads

XXI

A few sought forgetting in the Palace of Spells
They wore a black cross over their hearts
A black star glittered in their eyes
And they no longer could see
They had surrendered to the squids of lust
Having forgotten the rites of love
Hanging gardens gave shelter to their nights
There they fell asleep standing up

No echo reached their ears
Their souls wandered over the desert shore
Wrecked ships decayed on the sand
The fountains reeked of rotten leaves
The air was foul in the Witches' Cave

XXII

Women were waiting in empty rooms
Women were waiting before their doors
Women offered themselves for the night
And sold their love for half a crown
They wore a red ribbon around their necks
Their skin was hot from the flames of orgies
Gold glittered at the parting of their legs
A boy fought for them with his knife
Blood ran like wine over the sheets
"She who is not naked let her undress!"
Bodies glistened in the sweat of lust
As they played the travesty of love
A love as cold and empty as a corpse

XLIII

How could we have forgotten?
All the bridges had been cut
Our daughters wore their necklaces of tears
Our days were tapers by a death bed
But the nights roared like waterfalls
As we slept on the worn stones of graves
Who could find shelter outside of time?
Pleasure curdled within our hearts
A ghost vanished into the dusk
Paler than the phantom of liberty
And his voice was no longer heard
When would the dead open their mystery
The *Tír-n-an-Óg* of heroes and saints?

XLV

There are limpid days in the heart of winter
The meadow in the morning crackles under the frost
Slowly the cold has crept into the stone
The ivy still lives, clinging to the walls
On the hearth one last brand crumbles into ashes
On the soot a spark pins one final diamond
When all the mirrors have forgotten all the faces
The almond of night cracks under the cold
Dark is the house without fire or roof

Dark is the house without fire or bed
When thorns and nettles have covered the ruins
No one is left in our fathers' fields
We shall take back the night where the fire still burns

XLVIII

Our march had lasted for centuries
An entire people still marched through darkness
Blind people, deaf people, dumb people
Through the night where none would ever dream of stars
We would have to speak for the dumb
We would have to listen for the deaf
We would have to see for the blind
But how far for the pen to reach the poem
For the world to be in our eyes
For the sea to sing in our ears
For the dead to speak through our mouths
So that we shall not be the last ones
Will the key be left in our hands

L

« A swan, a swan from across the sea !”
It's the air of freedom we are breathing
The thorn is blooming under our fingers
And the water springs forth from the rock
Even our rifles bear flowers
The wind dances on the heather
The phoenix has kept his promise
Wonder lands at our door
Clear is the stone of our threshold
A genie comes toward us
The lost ring is returned to us
The earth shines under the sun
For we now are the sun's elect

LI

Men of my land who did not abandon
Heroes of my land fallen in battle
And all those who died in foreign lands
Children of my land who came toward me
The old language sings in your mouth
Insults and affronts marked your way
Let justice at long last be given to you
All you wanted was to rise to man's height
You brought down the walls of shame
The saint in her blue veil watches over her children

The time has come to seize the crown
And you'll warm your hands at our ancestors' blaze
For the share of the fire in never large enough.

LII

The thorn will be softer than the rose
Spring will lavish its flowers
May will come in December
The chains of seasons will be broken
No step will be wasted
And we will sail to the fair isle
The nights will be as sweet as music
Life shall offer its jewels
The ark will open to the sky
Our hands will gather the stars
Young girls will laugh in the moonlight
Their breasts will be like suns
And we will drink at the mountain streams

LIII

The days go by, ominous, auspicious
The days go by, burdened with tears
The days go by, loaded with flowers
Spring is born again from winter
The temple unlocks its doors
The new year is already in bloom
The shadows lie at our feet
The cities hand over their keys
The rivers open their fords
The streams roll nuggets of gold
The soul at last is renewed
Blade shining upon the red silk
For the Celts are the sons of gods

Notes

These texts are written for readers familiarized with the mythology and the history of the Celts, and especially the Bretons. Even translated into English, they are not easily understood by readers who lack this documentation. These notes may be of some help. There is, in this entire collection, a parallel between the history of an individual, which goes from the blissful innocence of the child to the bitter experience of the adolescent and the man, and the collective history of the Celts. The mythical origins of which the *Skêtla Segobrani* give an edenic picture were followed by triumphant centuries of conquest which made the Celts the masters of Europe, and by the dark centuries of defeat, subjection, and exile. Individual and collective subjection led to rebellions and to the utopian vision of a future rebirth. The similarity of the first and final lines (I, "The gods then were close to us, LIII "For the Celts are sons of gods") suggests that the return

to the ecstasy of origins and the reconquest of independence are closely linked.

II. We followed the foxes' teaching : English equivalent of the Breton expression « to attend the foxes' scholl », i. e. "to play truant"

VI. The mermaid plays an important role in Celtic folklore. She often is linked to the figure of Dahut, king Gradlon's daughter, who was changed into a mermaid as a punishment for her debauchery. She has been pushed by the devil to open the gates which protected the city of Ys from the sea and thus destroyed the magnificent capital of her father's kingdom. (*Barzaz Breiz*, VI).

VII. The "fair isle" represent the mythical paradise of Celtic tradition, the Irish *Tír na nÓg*, the Breton *Gwenva*..

IX. This is how the Romans treated the Celtic tribes defeated by Caesar's legions, Between the fourth and the seventh centuries, Armorica, which was sparsely populated, was a place of refuge for the Bretons who had left Great Britain rather than to submit to the Anglo-Saxon invaders. They founded three kingdoms, Domnonea, Kerne, and Bro-Eereg. These three kingdom fused into a single one, the kingdom of Brittany.

XV. In 1488, the Breton army and its Austrian and British allies were defeated at Saint-Albin-an-Hiliber by a stronger French force helped by Italian mercenaries, and especially the Genoese artillery. As a consequence of this defeat, the heiress to the Breton throne, Anne, had to break off her intended marriage to an Austrian duke (this would have given Brittany the protection of the Holy Roman Empire), and was forced to marry the heir to the throne of France. In 1532, he Breton Estates had to sign the Treaty of Union between Brittany and France. Brittany managed to retain certain liberties: the most important were that she would keep her administrative and legal systems. No tax could be levied in Brittany without the consent of the Breton Estates, and no Breton citizen could be forced to serve in the French army outside of the territory of Brittany

XVII. The French kings soon attempted to suppress the liberties guaranteed by the Treaty of Union, which caused rebellions which were harshly suppressed by the French army. Under Louis XIV, Breton rebels were hanged from the trees lining public roads or send to row on the king's galleys. Under the Regency which followed the death of Louis XIV, Pontkalleg led a conspiracy ; captured by treachery, he was beheaded in 1720. Kadoudal was a leader of the rebellion against the tyranny of the Revolutionary government, which had unilaterally annulled the Treaty of Union, and of Napoleon: he was guillotined in 1804 with eleven co-conspirators.

XXI-XXII. During the XIXth century, Brittany fell into a period of economic and political depression. Many Bretons lost any hope that their country could ever regain its place on the scene of history. Many also were the young men and women who had to leave their homes to seek work, often in vain, in the industrial suburbs of French cities. And who fall prey to drink and vice. Stories of young Breton girls forced into prostitution are quite common at that time. But his was also the time when devoted collectors gathered traditional ballads, legends, tales, superstitions, proverbs, sayings etc... (*Brizeux, La Villemarqué, Penguern, Luzel, Anatole Le Braz, Troude*...).

XLIII. It was only toward the end of the XIXth century that the Breton people regained a full sense of their ethnic identity which they shared with other Celtic nations, Ireland,, Scotland, Manx, Wales and Cornwall. The need to reestablish the link with their past is suggested by the reference to the *Tír-n-an-Óg*. The ancient Celtic culture is also evoked in XLV by two lines borrowed from a Welsh poem (ll. 9-10).

XLVIII. This text refers to those whose duty it is to show their people what has been stolen from them. Poets and artists must give back their sight to the blind, their hearing to the deaf, their voice to the mute.

L. The first line is taken from *An Alarc'h*, ballad no XVII in La Villemarqué's le *Barzaz Breiz*. It recalls the return of Jean IV de Montfort, who came back from exile in 1379 to reclaim the crown of Brittany against a pretender backed by the French. This ballad is a favourite of Breton singers. It was sung by Alan Stivell at the memorable show which he gave in the Parisian recital hall Olympia in 1972. When he added two lines of his own, *Enor, enor d'ar Vretoned, Enor, enor d'ar Vretoned, / Ha mallozh ruz d'ar C'hallaoued* [Honor, honor to the Bretons / And the red curse on the French], the audience, which was made up mostly of Bretons, exploded in yelling and applause.

LI. This text is an homage to those who never stopped in their struggle for their land. "The saint in her blue veil" is the patron saint of Brittany, *Santez ANNA*.

LII-LIII. The utopian vision presented here is similar to the one which appears in Roparz Hemon's novel. *An Aotrou Bimbochet e Breizh*. The place it occupies in this work is symmetrical to the edenic image presented in the opening texts. Sections L-LIII are an expression of the Breton people's renewed confidence in their future. It is a fact that French governments, since the time of Charlemagne, have constantly strived to control their subjects by every mean at their disposal: legal system, police, army, and innumerable government regulations about finance, commerce, industry, agriculture, education, etc... At the present time, the government has direct control over the railroads, the airlines, the telecommunications, radio, TV, electricity, and atomic energy. This type of control has been in existence under every form of government, empire, monarchy, or republic. It appears that every government believed that it could not control its subjects without suppressing their ethnic identity, be they Alsations, Basques, Bretons, Corsicans, Provençaux, or, more recently, Muslim Arabs or Berbers from France's former North African possessions, Algeria Tunisia, and Morocco. In order to save their language, their culture and their ethnic identity, the Breton people have made extraordinary efforts. They have created an entire school system in which, from pre-school to college level, all classes are taught in Breton, Breton-language publishing houses and journals, theater companies and choirs performing in Breton, piping bands which play traditional music, and dance groups which perform traditional dances. Breton singers perform for huge crowds and make discs which sell by the millions. Breton towns put up bilingual street and road signs. Breton businesses are encouraged to make use of Breton in the work place and for advertising. Campaigns have been launched to bring the French government to sign the European community Charter for Ethnic Minorities and to grant at least some autonomy to its ethnic minorities. This, of course, goes against ten centuries of efforts by this same government to centralize all authority in Paris, but this trend has been successfully defeated in other European countries: in Great Britain for Northern Ireland and Scotland, in Spain for Catalunya, in Belgium for its small German minority, to give but a few examples.

Days of Darkness

DAYS OF DARKNESS [Excerpts]

I

Everything had started at the hospital
The sick were murdering the doctors
They did not want to wait for death
Squatting amid their rotting flesh
Even for children time stood still
Even when playing under the sun
In the warm days of new mown hay
Nursing babies spat at the breast
And vomited the bitter milk
The lights of mercy had gone out

III

The days of darkness had arrived
Days without spring, days without pitch
The nightingale had lost its song
Echo no longer answered our calls
Silence reigned on the horizon
A hearse rattled on the pavement
The night had a smell of blood
Knives glittered in the doorways
And death was shining in the steel
As earth pulled at our feet

VI

The stars no longer came near the earth
They had fled far from us
The sky threatened to crush us
A sword blade pierced our nights
Mouths no longer knew how to kiss
They only knew how to bite
Blood remained at the corner of the lips
The mainspring of the heart was creaking
Despair set its traps
The sleeper was murdered by his dream

VIII

The gypsy howled in her nightmare
She could not get out of the whirlpool
We wanted to press the grapes of time

But desire was a sharpened blade
They had taken away all the games of love
The moon no longer came through the windows
And nights no longer brought the treasure of oblivion
Where were the girls with their painted lips ?
Who could tear down such thick walls?
Hyenas barked in the slums

X

Joy no longer haunted our thresholds
And women denied us the bliss
Of their bodies' marvelous fruits
They went off to bend their knees
Instead of dancing in the moonlight
Offering to our eyes their breasts
Light and bare as they once did
We did not trust the dove
Nor did we trust life
Centuries led nowhere

XII

Bells had tolled their final knell
Night fell over the fog
The yews were a dark mystery
Flowers no longer adorned the graves
And the dead no longer came to us
Was there anyone still alive?
Everyone was but a ghost
Vague sorrows floated above the waves
Crowned with black circles
As Ankou waited in the bay

XII, l. 10. Ankou : Breton personification of death. His ship wait near the shore for the souls of the deceased to transport them to the Isle of the Dead

TABLE

Lament for Brittany

Foreword

I-LIII

Notes

Days of Darkness

I-XII